

## Vietnam Generation

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Volume 2

Number 2 *Kent and Jackson State: 1970-1990*

Article 21

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1-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Dietz, Tom (1995) "Simple Themes and Complex Reality in the Spring of 1970," *Vietnam Generation*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 21.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/vietnamgeneration/vol2/iss2/21>

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# **Simple Themes and Complex Realities in the Spring of 1970**

**Tom Dietz**

Each year on May 4 I walk into the forest and spend an hour or two sitting above a valley, reflecting on the Spring of 1970 and my life since then. As an ecologist, I know the world and the flow of events in it are too complex to capture directly. Humans mold and structure perceptions and memories to make sense of them. As personal and planetary history moves forward, our vision of the past can become simple and the context of events can disappear. My annual retreat is a way to sustain the complexity of that Spring while I try to understand it.

In ecology, there is a tension between complexity and simplicity. Ecologists love the complexity of the biosphere and struggle against the loss of living diversity caused by deforestation, pollution, and other human activities. But ecologists also value abstract models that make sense of the world. For many of us, contemplating how the simple process of Darwinian evolution produced the complex reality of life on earth is fascinating and rewarding. Ecology is a dialogue between our models and the complex natural history of the planet.

Personal understandings of the world and its history also are conversations between complexity and a simpler view that we can comprehend. Looking down on a wooded valley I realize that the forest in my mind is a dialogue between me and the forest in the world. In turn, the Spring of 1970 in my mind is a dialogue with a complex reality. Reflecting on that time I find some simple themes in a complex, diverse reality. Both the simple and the complex are valuable, each incomplete without the other.

The simple story of Kent is one of dramatic events: the May 1 rally, Water Street that night, the burning of the ROTC building, the shootings, evacuation, continued martial law, indictments, seizing the library, the gym controversy, and so on. These are the first things I think about and usually the first things I'm asked about. But I've found it impossible to make sense of the dramatic events by themselves, and difficult to explain them to others. They lack context and the complexity that comes with it. Without context, Spring, 1970, does not have meaning. It is from the complicated details that the themes and understanding emerge. Over the last twenty years, several themes and details have become important to me.

## **Community**

The networks that linked people and organizations at Kent were extensive and dense. Organizations grew from other organizations. Fellowship of Reconciliation, Kent Free University, Kent Anarchists, Environmental Conservation Organization, Kent Legal Defense Fund, and Kent Community Project were sustained by the same people, and each of these organizations overlapped with many others. This web of relationships, this community, *was* the movement. It was where we learned and supported each other. I don't believe the energy and creativity of that period could have existed without it.

## **Greens, Feminists, and Gays**

April 22, 1970, was the first Earth Day, and marked the birth of the new environmental movement. May 6 "Project Earth" was to have taken place—Kent State's environmental teach-in. During the Spring of 1970, the women's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement were also active at Kent. All were part of the community. For example, the first working groups of the environmental, women's liberation and gay liberation movement were sponsored by the Free University. Green, feminist, and gay perspectives expanded the concerns of the antiwar movement. These new visions of politics demonstrated the political importance of everyday life and the value of intuitive, personal understanding. And, in turn, the green, feminist, and gay movements benefited from the understanding of structure and power developed in antiwar politics.

## **Art and Politics**

Art was political and politics incorporated the vision and creativity of art. To the list of organizations above I could have added the Needle's Eye, the Tuesday Night Cinema, the Folk Festival, and Gentle Thursday. Art was part of the community and not separate from politics. This made the art more emotionally powerful, while the politics became broader and deeper. Even the Ohio prosecutors seemed to understand this when they included in the Grand Jury Report an attack on the Jefferson Airplane.

## **Playfulness and Discipline**

Simple images of dramatic events filter out both the playfulness of that spring, and the seriousness as well. Fictional accounts seem to have only two kinds of activists: the grim revolutionary and the naive flower child. The flower child might pass out free chili at the student union to show that "there is such a thing as a free lunch," or wear a Nixon mask at rallies. The grim activist would work endless hours to raise several hundred thousand dollars as part of the Kent Legal Defense Fund's efforts to fight back against Ohio's

prosecution of the Kent 25. But in reality, the same people did both. The playfulness allowed experimentation, relieved tension, and provided the powerful weapon of humor. The discipline got things done.

After a time, my thoughts in the forest turn to the present. Recent changes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and southern Africa offer some hope of progress on problems of racism, poverty, imperialism, and authoritarian rule. But there is much more that needs to be done. The struggle around these issues remains difficult. And new problems are growing urgent. Over the last twenty years our worst fears about damage to the planetary environment are proving true. Sexism and racism are still prevalent. And weapons of mass destruction threaten millions.

The enormity of these problems is discouraging. But over the last twenty years social movements have persisted and grown, and I believe this decade will see activism flourish. There are lessons for the 1990s in the themes that help me understand the Spring of 1970. First, movements have grown too specialized, issue specific, and professional. The networks that make a community should be strengthened so that the community can inform and sustain us. Second, art and playfulness must have a central place in political action because we will need creativity and laughter. Finally, the green and feminist movements offer profound insights not found in other strains of progressive politics and should be at the core of our thinking. But green and feminist thinking must also confront problems of structure and power, and can benefit from the insights of more traditional analyses. The problems we face now cannot be understood or solved by a narrow perspective.

Spring, 1970, changes for me each time I think about it. Different parts of that complex time become important as personal and planetary history move forward. The present provides the basis for understanding the past, for finding themes and lessons. Reality is so complex that we can always learn from it as the dialogue between the simple and the complex continues.



Students and activists tear down the fence surrounding the gym construction site.  
Photo © by John P. Rowe.